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SUBJECT: VIETNAM TIP: THE TAIWAN MARRIAGE PHENOMENON

1. Summary: Taiwan has become the export destination of choice for Vietnamese brides. 73,000 women - 95 percent of Vietnamese marrying foreigners - have married Taiwanese men since the phenomenon began to take off in 1995. Demand is growing, driven by (1) the desire of lower-middle class Taiwanese men to marry young women willing to play a traditional family role and (2) the desire of Mekong Delta women to escape from grinding rural poverty and provide for their families. Some high-profile cases of abuse and trafficking have hit the press, triggering intense scrutiny of the phenomenon in Taiwan and in Vietnam, but so far evidence points to trafficking cases being the exception, not the rule. Taiwan authorities, the GVN, some NGOs, and local support organizations in communities with large numbers of Vietnamese who have married Taiwanese men all agree that 90-95 percent of these marriages are successful, and an even higher percentage are legitimate. End summary.

IS IT TRAFFICKING?

2. Some believe that the practice of Taiwanese men arranging marriages in Vietnam with the help of for-profit matchmaking agencies is a form of trafficking in persons. Paula-Frances Kelly, an Australian author and academic, identified "Confucian concepts common to Taiwanese and Vietnamese cultures" as the main drivers of the Taiwan-Vietnam marriage connection. According to Kelly, Confucian "filial piety" obligations of Taiwanese men to care for their parents by marrying a traditional woman who will help fulfill that duty are increasingly hard to meet. Young Taiwanese women are rejecting the traditional, subservient role of a Confucian wife and daughter-in-law in favor of urban lifestyles, higher education, and professional careers. According to a 2002 study by the Can Tho province Women's Union among Taiwanese men seeking to marry Vietnamese women, 46 percent of Taiwanese men said they came to Vietnam to find a wife because it was "difficult and expensive to marry Taiwanese women in Taiwan". Ms. Tran Thi Thuy, Vice President of the Can Tho Women's Union, said Taiwanese men describe Can Tho women as "beautiful, industrious, dexterous, and capable of helping their husbands with work and domestic chores".

3. The reality for most Vietnamese-Taiwanese marriages is not romantic. According to Mrs. Do Thi Nhu Tam, Director of the Mobility Research and Support Center (a Vietnamese NGO) the usual pattern is for a Taiwanese man to contract with a Taiwan-based agency to arrange travel to Vietnam, development of a selection of potential brides, and facilitation of the bureaucratic necessities surrounding the marriage and subsequent immigration to Taiwan. Agencies charge from USD 8,000 to USD 15,000 for providing these services, according to media reports.

4. On the Vietnam side, Taiwanese agencies are affiliated with Taiwanese or Vietnamese agencies in Ho Chi Minh City which then subcontract with smaller for-profit "matchmakers" in the Mekong Delta. These smaller matchmakers then recruit potential brides and charge them a fee (refundable if they are chosen) to prepare them for a selection process known in the Delta as "the contest". The process is the beauty-pageant style parade of women from which the Taiwanese grooms in HCMC or Can Tho choose the "finalists". After the preparation, which includes beautification treatments, a few Chinese language lessons, and even in some cases surgery, the candidates are brought to Ho Chi Minh City and presented to the Taiwanese clients in large groups in a public place such as a park or hotel. The successful candidate from the group will then live with her new fiance for up to a month in a hotel while the paperwork for her immigration to Taiwan is finalized. It is during that month that the wedding ceremony is performed and the traditional "bride-price" is paid to the family. This amount ranges from USD 300 to USD 3000, depending on various factors, including the amount of commission taken by the Vietnamese matchmaker. [Note: this "bride price" is also paid in some Vietnamese-Vietnamese weddings, though it is more common in rural areas for the groom's family to pay in livestock or other commodities. End note.]

5. Vietnamese women's own sense of duty to their families encourages them to try to marry in a way that will improve their families' condition, even though it may require the

considerable sacrifice of moving far from their homes and families, noted Ms. Lu Thi Ngoc Anh, President of the Women's Union of Can Tho, in a speech on September 20, 2002 in Can Tho. The Can Tho Women's Union 2002 study found that 90 percent of Vietnamese brides surveyed were under age 25 and came from families that were poor or in debt. Mrs. Do Thi Nhu Tam believes that the combination of poverty and family obligation "conditions" Vietnamese women and drives them into marriages with Taiwanese strangers against their will. To Mrs. Nhu Tam, poor Vietnamese girls marrying Taiwanese men are being trafficked. In a December 1, 2003 meeting with Poloff in Ho Chi Minh City, she said "there is no difference between a woman marrying a Taiwanese stranger to elevate the family's economic situation and being taken to Cambodia to be a sex worker."

16. Ms. Nhu Tam's view of all arranged marriages between partners at different socioeconomic levels is at the extreme end of the spectrum, but Vietnamese (and Taiwanese) press outlets have also seized on more conventional trafficking cases related to Taiwanese marriage. The Vietnamese Women (Phu Nu) magazine, and the Youth Newspaper (Tuoi Tre) have both run expose-style articles telling the stories of Vietnamese women who have gone to Taiwan for marriage but found themselves sold to brothels, forced to serve other family members sexually, or kept in abusive conditions as slave labor. The China Times in Taiwan ran an article on October 9, 2003 identifying four Vietnamese girls trafficked to the southern Taiwan port city of Kaohsiung. The girls said they had been brought over by "marriage brokers".

17. The Taiwan authorities, Vietnam Women's Union officials, and provincial-level government officials acknowledge abuses within the system but maintain that the rate of bad cases is very low. Mr. Robert C. Lee, the visa official at the Taipei Economic and Cultural Relations Office (TECO) in Ho Chi Minh City, said in a meeting with Poloff and HCMC Conoff that he estimated that trafficking cases represented less than one percent of the marriage visas he issued each year. He acknowledged that some marriages go bad, and that there are abusive husbands in Taiwan just as there are elsewhere, but said that only 5 percent of marriages between Vietnamese and Taiwanese end in divorce. (Note: he also mentioned that he had "several" inquiries each day from Taiwanese husbands looking for Vietnamese wives who had left Taiwan, and that dealing with these cases took a great deal of his time. The 5 percent figure seems low. End note.) Lee also noted that Taiwan does not have a "fiance" visa the way the U.S. has. Women going to Taiwan for marriage must marry their Taiwanese husbands in Vietnam, and the couple must appear in person both in the TECO office and in the Vietnamese Justice Department to register their marriage. This, he noted, is a significant logistical obstacle for traffickers who might want to use marriage as a way to conceal human trafficking.

18. Women's Union officials in Can Tho and An Giang provinces agreed with Mr. Lee's assessment. In Can Tho, Women's Union VP Thuy said that for the most part, marriages between women in Can Tho and Taiwanese men were both legal and successful. She said that a small number of women who went to Taiwan ended up as prostitutes there, but sad it was "not many". In Long Xuyen, the capital of An Giang province, the Women's Union was more explicit. "I wish," An Giang Provincial Women's Union chief Nguyen Thi Lien said, "that the marriages between Vietnamese in An Giang were as successful as the marriages between Vietnamese from An Giang and Taiwanese men". She acknowledged that she knew of some cases where women had returned with stories of being forced to be domestic servants or even to sexually service other family members in Taiwan. These were rare, she added, compared to the large number of successful marriages.

#### WORKING TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION

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19. The GVN is sensitive to the perception that Vietnamese women are a commodity to be bought and sold, noted UN Office on Drugs and Crime representative Troels Vester. The press has picked up on some of the stories of women who have been mistreated in Taiwan, and this has put pressure on the GVN to investigate the situation. At the same time, Taiwan takes the position that "based on humane reasons and ethical concerns. . . Taiwan must through the legal system protect and take good care of foreign brides married to Taiwanese men," according to a speech by David Wu, Director General of TECO in HCMC. Taiwan makes an effort to educate Vietnamese women prior to their departure for Taiwan, said Mr. Lee. He showed Poloff and HCMC Conoff copies of various pamphlets, books, cards, and brochures written in simple Vietnamese explaining the rights and responsibilities of both parties in a Taiwan marriage. The documents also featured phone numbers staffed by Vietnamese speakers who were standing by in Taiwan to help in an emergency situation.

110. The Vietnamese side is also alert and watching for abuse within the context of marriage between Vietnamese women and

Taiwanese men, according to Nguyen Thi Lien. "We have a propaganda program in place," she said, "to encourage members of the Women's Union to be vigilant and look out for abuses of Vietnamese women". Nguyen Thi Tuyet, Director of the Justice Department of Can Tho province, said in a 2002 speech "We need to enhance the sense of responsibility and the coordination among branches, [of government] in the education, verification and assessment of applications for marriage registration observing legal stipulations in order to protect the well-being and human dignity of Vietnamese women". Tuyet noted that Taiwanese-Vietnamese marriages are legal under the laws of both countries, and that data so far seemed to indicate that most of the marriages were successful and legitimate. Still, she said, the GVN would continue to monitor the situation, and "if the number of unfortunate cases is large, it will become an issue requiring the State's intervention".

11. Comment: The women participating in these marriages are young, uneducated, and very poor. They are marrying men from Taiwan for economic reasons and enduring the hardship of living as a foreigner in another society. The decision to marry is, however, a legal and permissible choice. The fact that economic imbalances result in an outflow of young Vietnamese women to Taiwan is an embarrassing and emotional issue for Vietnam, and has provoked a great deal of official attention. This attention, and similar inquiries by Taiwan officials, have not revealed any evidence to conclude that marriage to Taiwanese is a significant vector for trafficking in persons from or through Vietnam.  
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